

THE NUDE IN THE ARTWORKS OF RAJA RAVI VERMA, AMRITA SHERGILL, JAMINI ROY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The representation of the nude figure has held a central place in the history of global art, symbolizing various concepts—beauty, fertility, spirituality, vulnerability, and power. The depiction of the nude in Indian art is a complex cultural narrative shaped by aesthetic choices, socio-political commentary, and personal expression. In Indian art, the nude had traditionally been associated with divine forms (such as yakshis and apsaras) or tantric symbolism, but colonial rule, Victorian morality, and Western academic art influenced how nudity was visualized, critiqued, and celebrated in modern India. This comparative study examines how each artist conceptualized and represented the nude, revealing shifting perspectives on body, identity, and art in modern India. Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Sher-Gil, and Jamini Roy—three giants of Indian modernism—approached the nude in radically different ways. This paper explores how three pioneering artists—Raja Ravi Varma, Jamini Roy, and Amrita Sher-Gil—engaged with the nude, revealing the socio-political, aesthetic, and ideological shifts in Indian modern art. While Varma used the nude within a mythological framework influenced by European realism, Roy largely excluded it in favor of stylized indigenous forms, and Sher-Gil redefined it through a modernist, feminist lens.

Keywords: Nude Painting, Stylistic Approach, Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Shergil, Jamini Roy, Comparative Study

1. INTRODUCTION

In Indian art unclothed figures are very common and deep-rooted in tradition but it took a new stance during the colonial period. Compares how each artist handled cultural identity, subject, symbols and artistic autonomy through their treatment of the nude. It also looks at how their works collectively represent larger shifts in Indian art from colonial imitation to modernist innovation and indigenous revivalism. The study aims to shed light on the larger conversation about body politics, tradition, and artistic identity in Indian art history by examining their stylistic decisions, thematic concerns, and cultural contexts.

This study undertakes a comparative study of how three prominent Indian artists- Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Sher-Gil, and Jamini Roy- approached the nude in

their artworks. Each of these artists, working in different time periods and with distinct artist ideologies, engaged with the nude form in ways that reflected their personal visions, cultural inheritances, and responded to colonial and post-colonial modernity.

Raja Ravi Verma was the founder of modern Indian art, combined Indian mythical subjects with European academic realism. His depictions of the naked, frequently dressed as goddesses or heroines, were the meeting point of colonial-era visual culture, sensuality, and divinity. One of India's leading modernist painters, Amrita Shergil, tackled the nude with a daring, reflective look influenced by both her own bicultural identity and European modernism. Her work reflects a deep concern with the female body. In contrast,

Her work reflects a deep concern with the female body, not as an object of desire, but as a site of agency and cultural commentary. In contrast, preferred a stylized, folk-inspired aesthetic above overt sensualism and Western academic traditions. In modern Indian art, his abstraction of the human figure tells volumes about indigenous visual languages and moral norms, even though he rarely painted the nude in a literal sense.

2. RAJA RAVI VERMA

Raja Ravi Verma was prior of modern artist; Modern art refers to the art created in India between nineteenth century and the present, which is distinguished by a fusion of contemporary west, influences with traditional Indian techniques. Verma has created an amalgamation of European academic realism, especially oil color techniques of renaissance and romanticism with the theme of traditional Indian iconography. Amongst his most celebrated paintings, Verma's representation of the nude and semi-nude form of human- an artistic choice that challenged and redefine notions of decorum, beauty, mythology and idealized femininity in colonial India. Verma's artistic style has influence of west, but the themes are Indigenous from the traditional folklore, revisiting his influence in the context of contemporary India art reveals complex continuities and discrepancies in the representation of the nude.

He drew female figures are typically sensual yet divine, often draw from the Hindu epic like the Ramayana and Mahabharata and other religious text. A painting of a woman by a riverbank that is frequently called a "semi-clothed woman" when discuss Raja Ravi Verma's nude paintings, prominent among his famous paintings are Tilottama, Varini, Rupasundari. In those paintings, figure features a graceful and in a natural scene, is well known for its serene and tranquil ambiance. Raja Ravi Verma attempted to normalize the clothed and naked within the divine figure and of average people, legitimize sensuality in Indian art from the colonial time in Indian art. Raja Ravi Verma attempted to normalize the representation of both clothed and naked figures, including divine beings and ordinary people, while also legitimizing sensuality in Indian art during the colonial period.

Despite the challenge of creating a national style distinct from the preexisting conventional styles remained unresolved, Verma was successful in re-establishing Indian concepts as national values [Mago \(2012\)](#). His work bridged traditional Indian aesthetics with Western techniques, allowing for a richer exploration of human emotion and experience. This innovative approach not only influenced contemporary artists but also helped to reshape the perception of Indian art on the global stage. Raja Ravi Varma was well read and understood the stories from the epics that he took as a subject to showcase his talent. His paintings not only captured the essence of these tales but also brought to life the rich cultural heritage of India.

Through his brushstrokes, he breathed new life into ancient myths, making them accessible and relatable to a contemporary audience.

Figure 1 A notable work in chromolithography was printed by Raja Ravi Verma in the year 1896 this print is derived from his own painting. Tilottama appears as a resolute young woman partially naked playing in the clouds with a ball. Tilottama's elegance and grace are captured in this artwork, which is renowned for its accurate depiction and meticulous attention to detail.

Tilottama was a divine and exquisite apsara (celestial nymph) descended from the heaven. On the request of Brahma, the divine builder Vishwakarma to make her for a purpose to help get rid of the two strong and evil asura bother who were causing trouble in all three worlds. She was so beautiful that even the gods couldn't take their eyes off her. They were so close and couldn't live without each other that no weapon or force could hurt them unless they turned on each other. Both the evil brother fell in with this apsara and wanted her for himself. They finally fought and died in the fight because they were so full of desire and jealousy. This was exactly what the gods had planned.

Figure 1

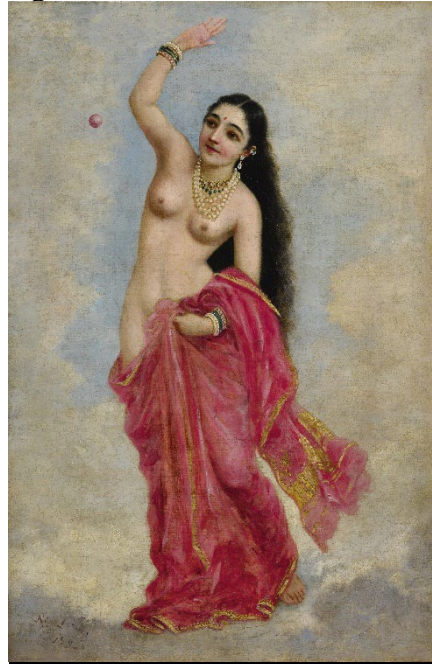


Figure 1 Tilottama (Size- 50 x 35 cm) Chromolithography

3. AMRITA SHERGIL

Amrita- Shergil was Hungarian-born from Indian Sikh father Umrao Singh Shergil Majithia and Hungarian mother Marie Antoinette. She is considered a pioneer of modern Indian art and one of the greatest avant-garde women artists of the early twentieth century.

She started drawing and painting from a very young age, especially illustrating Hungarian fairy tales. At the age of fourteen, Amrita's passion for drawing and painting was recognized by her maternal uncle, who came back from Hungary and encouraged her to draw from life models. Over the course of the following three years as a student in Paris, she explored male and female nudes and drew countless sketches of family members, friends and professional models, mostly in charcoal. There, she was exposed to various artistic movements, which significantly

influenced her distinctive style that blended both Eastern and Western elements. Her artistic journey was marked by an evolving understanding of form and emotion, as she sought to capture the essence of her subjects on paper. Her distinct style was ultimately influenced by each sketch, which improved her technical proficiency while also broadening her understanding of the human condition.

When she first started paint in oils, she made more than sixty paintings primarily studied nude models, aside from this she painter her own portraits against dramatically red-hot background, which assert her personality's uniqueness. She was encouraged by Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne, and Hennry Matisse, who were prominent impressionist from twentieth century [Mago \(2012\)](#).

Traditionally, in art, women were frequently objectified, idealized, and sexualized as passive objects of the masculine gaze. This dynamic was reversed by Sher-Gil. Her female characters are self-reliant, reflective, and emotionally nuanced. Her women are introspective, self-contained, and emotionally complex. They are not painted for the pleasure of an external viewer but seem to exist, aware of their inner lives.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Nude Study (6) 60 cm 83 cm Oil on canvas

4. JAMINI ROY

Jamini Roy was born in the West Bengali small village of Beliator in Bankura district in 1887. He completed graduation in the year 1936 from the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Calcutta. While studying in college, he learnt European realistic paintings. He explores the academic style of work in his career by receiving regular commissions even after graduating from the art school. A very short period in his career did portraits, which he did in oils on canvas, mostly to cover his Calcutta living costs. He was well known and skilled in his academic style portrait painting.

And compares how each artist handled cultural identity, subject, symbols and artistic autonomy through their treatment of the nude. It also looks at how their works collectively represent larger shifts in Indian art from colonial imitation to modernist innovation and indigenous revivalism. The study aims to shed light on the larger conversation about body politics, tradition, and artistic identity in Indian art history by examining their stylistic decisions, thematic concerns, and cultural contexts.

The standing nude show in [Figure 3](#) is the best example of his engagement with the European realism of his academic style. In this painting a female model standing in a very unique way with her right leg forward. The model's long black serpent like hair is on the waist which is covered her genital with one hand and the other hand is holding the remaining half hair. The dimension of the painting is about 18.20 x 5.50 inches rectangular painting painted with oils on canvas. The nude title painting of Jamini Roy reminds us of the masterpiece painting of Sandro Botticelli called "The Birth of Venus".

Jamini Roy, educated in European academic methods, produced early works characterized by portraits and landscapes inspired by Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Later, During the 1920s, he experienced a profound artistic metamorphosis, redirecting his attention to indigenous subjects and exploring folk-inspired forms and techniques.

Another presented [Figure 4](#) painting by Jamini Roy; many depictions of daily activities reveal his strong fondness for rural life. His depictions of women performing chores at home, farmers working in fields, and children playing were influenced by folk dolls, children's artwork, and the traditional 'patas' of rural Bengal. His intense fascination with the Santhal tribal people produced realistic depictions of their everyday activities, such as dancing, harvesting, and musical performances, which perfectly captured the joy and rhythm that are vital to Santhal culture. These pieces are both visually arresting and approachable, with their strong, simple forms and flat compositions reminiscent of Kalighat paintings.

Figure 3

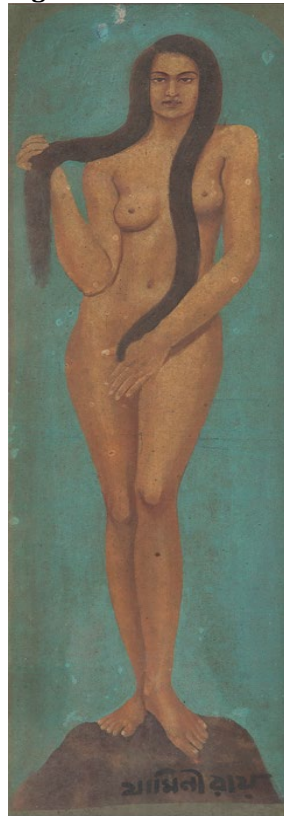


Figure 3 The Nude Oil on Canvas Size: 18.20 x 5.50 in

Figure 4



Figure 4 Santhal women Tempra on Board Size: 26.5 x 14.3 in

5. CONCLUSION

The nude in Indian modern art evolves through these three artists—from Raja Ravi Varma's divinized sensuality to Amrita Sher-Gil's emotive introspection, to Jamini Roy's abstract spirituality. Each artist, in their own way, redefined the boundaries of the nude—moving it from the sacred, to the personal, to the cultural. Together, they chart a rich visual and ideological journey of the human body in modern Indian art.

Stylistic approach of Raja Ravi Verma, Amrita Shergil and Jamini Roy are reflected artistic distinct from each other shaped by self-expression, cultural symbolism, feminist approach. Raja Ravi Verma blended elements from Indian mythology with European academic realism which shows his stylistic approach. On the contrary Jamini Roy reinterpreted traditional femininity in a way that was liberating and non-objectifying. Amrita Shergil, reclaiming the gaze that bother female very often. Traditionally women in art were used to portray passively, but Roy reinterpreted femininity in a way that was liberating and non-objectifying.

Unlike other painters or academic painters who often depicted female in passive subject of male -sexualize, idealized and objectified this dynamic is reversed by Jamini Roy. He approached femineity with dignity through indigenous visual presentation. Meanwhile he rejected both colonial academics and western eroticism and accept Indian traditional folk art. Their works collectively challenge simplistic

readings of the nude, revealing it as a complex intersection of artistic intent, cultural symbolism, and evolving ideologies in Indian art history.

By examining these three perspectives, this research underscores the importance of contextual interpretation in understanding the nude—not as a static symbol of beauty or transgression, but as a dynamic expression of artistic and socio-political consciousness in modern Indian art.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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